

First Nation 'shocked' over Dempster caribou hunting changes

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Vuntut Gwich'in First Nation leaders are demanding answers from the Yukon government, after it lifted long-standing rules that restricted caribou hunting along the Dempster Highway.

In a release Wednesday, the Yukon Environment Department announced that it won't be enforcing a rule barring caribou hunting within a 500-metre corridor on either side of the highway this fall. That gives caribou hunters easy access to the herd from the side of the road.

The department has also dropped an annual one-week ban on hunting, originally put in place to allow leaders of the Porcupine caribou herd to migrate across the northern highway undisturbed.

Environment officials say the changes were made to avoid a legal challenge by the Tr'ondek Hwech'in First Nation of Dawson City. Charges have been stayed against two Tr'ondek Hwech'in hunters who had been earlier facing charges related to illegal highway hunting.

But Chief Joe Linklater of the Old Crow-based Vuntut Gwich'in told CBC News that the Porcupine herd needs better protection rather than more hunting pressure.

"I was really quite shocked and disappointed, so I'm hoping to meet with the premier and hopefully we can get this straightened out and try to find a way to ensure that we're managing the herd properly rather than just playing these silly little political games," Linklater said Wednesday.

"He may be appeasing one First Nation, but we see this as being something that's really threatening our way of life."

People in the largely Vuntut Gwich'in community of Old Crow, the Yukon's most northerly community located nearly 800 kilometres northwest of Whitehorse, have long opposed road hunting to the extent that they've banned it on the only road leading out of their community.

Linklater said it's not only a matter of ensuring public safety, but also conserving the caribou herd his community relies on. He said he wants an explanation from Premier Dennis Fentie, who is also the Yukon environment minister.

Conservation board disappointed

The caribou hunting rules for the Dempster Highway were put in place in 1999 by the Porcupine Caribou Management Board, a tri-jurisdictional entity that involves First Nations and government officials from the Yukon, the Northwest Territories and Alaska.

The 500-metre corridor was imposed to help conserve the Porcupine caribou herd, as well as keep people along the Dempster Highway safe from flying bullets.

"We've been working on this issue for the past 14 years and we got the direction from the elders, so in a way, I'm kind of disappointed," board chairman Joe Tetlich said.

"Obviously, First Nations, myself included, have an inherent right to harvest caribou. But it's also my right to be responsible. And if we over hunt or if we use easy access, that means we're just helping along the decline of the herd."

Yukon government officials said they will consult with First Nation groups along the highway to figure out what caribou hunting rules should be applied in the future.

"I think what we need to do is go back to all the users — the First Nation communities, the Porcupine Caribou Management Board, this department — work together as a team to come up with something that will work for today and tomorrow," said Tony Grabowski, the Environment Department's enforcement and compliance manager.

The Yukon government stressed that the changes apply only to caribou hunters. Conservation officers will continue to enforce laws prohibiting other big game hunters from hunting big game within 500 metres of the Dempster.